

Jeanne Silverthorne:

The Studio Stripped Bare,

Again



Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris



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"Jeanne Silverthorne: The Studio Stripped Bare, Again,"
organized by Debra Singer, branch curator,
Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.

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Front and back outside cover, page 9: Jeanne Silverthorne,
The Studio Stripped Bare, Again, 1999 (installation view).
Photograph: George Hirose

Front and back inside cover, page 6:
Photograph by Jeanne Silverthorne

Pages 2–4: Jeanne Silverthorne,
The Studio Stripped Bare, Again, 1999 (installation detail).
Photograph: George Hirose

Pages 7, 10: Jeanne Silverthorne,
Working drawing and collages for
The Studio Stripped Bare, Again, 1999.
Photograph: George Hirose

Pages 5, 12: View of Jeanne Silverthorne's studio.
Photograph: George Hirose

Debra Singer

To this day, a writer friend of mine still insists on using pencil and paper to draft the long narratives he calls “short stories.” His inefficient process continues as he painstakingly repeats the exercise: first, by copying the texts neatly in pen onto fresh paper, and then by plucking them out letter by letter on his vintage typewriter. His obsessive devotion to longhand, he explains, is both a personal symbol of his affection for the past as well as a political commentary on our *fin-de-siècle* technological advancements.

Such dedication to outdated, repetitive, and laborious artistic methods also characterizes Jeanne Silverthorne’s art. Since the early 1990s, Silverthorne has created rubber sculptures using a cumbersome, old-fashioned casting process that involves plaster and rubber molds and lost clay originals. An array of everyday objects, most of which the artist finds in her studio, serve as unlikely subjects for these works. Rubber casts of items such as light bulbs, electrical motors, and fuse boxes are then presented alongside decidedly unfamiliar abstractions that either sit like “sculptures” on pedestals or hang like “paintings” on the wall. These disparate components work together to form complex, interdependent systems that parody art historical traditions, investigate myths surrounding the “artist’s studio,” and ask what it means to change the context of an art work from studio to gallery.

For this exhibition, Silverthorne produced a large-scale installation that occupies both the Philip Morris Sculpture Court and the gallery. The installation begins with elaborate clusters of rubber wires and circuitry suspended from the Sculpture Court ceiling. These looping, gathered bunches create three-dimensional drawings in space and labyrinthine tangles that dead-end at every wrong turn into dangling, empty light sockets. In the “correct” route of this maze, wires pass through a complex assemblage of rubber electrical conduits and utility boxes, eventually converging into one central wire that leads into the gallery. Once inside, the main wire plugs into a tiny rubber “lamp” equipped with a magnifying glass, which rests on a narrow



shelf along with three small, unassuming pieces of Styrofoam. This anti-climactic denouement sets up a ludicrous juxtaposition of scale: the enormous electrical apparatus not only culminates in a product that is outlandishly small, but also terminates in a hanging light bulb that does not function: like the exposed sockets, this fixture fails to illuminate.

The gallery itself is dimly lit, and its gray walls hardly resemble the sleek, bright white cube we have come to associate with “proper” displays of art. The space seems more like a run-down shop in an urban tenement. The normally pristine art gallery is further defiled as additional wires sprawl across the gallery floor, slither into real electrical outlets, and form a circuit that unites the objects in the room like a rudimentary system of arteries and tendons. Positioned in the center of room are three other biomorphic sculptures displayed on two incongruous, spongelike pedestals. Hanging on the walls are several rubber “paintings” of carved, undulating ocher and black patterns presented in black rubber replicas of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century frames.

These idiosyncratic objects are not simply abstract compositions. The biomorphic sculptures are actually enlarged copies of discarded scraps of Styrofoam left over

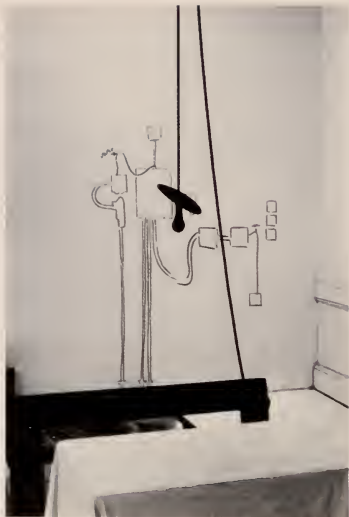






from the casting process, which Silverthorne found on her studio floor. It is the original models for these works that sit demurely atop the shelf. Similarly, the “paintings” are exacting copies of highly magnified microelectron photographs of human skin and sweat glands. The “paintings” thus literally depict sweat pores or beads of sweat on the skin’s surface. By copying random debris and scientific images, Silverthorne undercuts notions of originality attached to the myth of artistic “genius” and challenges modern art’s claims for abstraction as an expression of universal truth. She also critiques specific models that historically privilege the value of the medium. Her traditional casting process, for instance, recalls the sculptural methods of such modern masters as Rodin. But rather than marble or bronze, Silverthorne uses rubber, a medium associated with everyday items or industry. The material also appeals to her because its tactile qualities render objects more organic, suggestively fleshy, and thus less serious.

This irreverence likewise relates to the waste material—studio debris and sweat—that constitutes Silverthorne’s subject matter. “Sweat” evokes the idea of “labor,” which is often associated with physical work in fields or factories. In this respect, her unusual depictions of sweat can be read as an ironic response to romanticized images of the worker found in nineteenth-century French paintings. Neither “sweat” nor “labor,” moreover, are words generally applied to the context of the artist’s studio, even though making an art work is often physically demanding. In fact the idea of labor, as Silverthorne wryly reminds us, has been distanced from artistic creativity; the work of art is perceived as the product of effortless “genius”—a myth that developed out of the humanist emphasis on the individual and reached its zenith in nineteenth-century Romanticism. The artist’s



studio became a metonym for “creative man,” and was understood to be a space that only men could legitimately inhabit.¹ The image of the brilliant, solitary, male artist occupying the studio, where the creation of “masterpieces” takes place, has become a legendary trope in the cultural imaginary, epitomized in many respects by Rodin’s Paris atelier.

Central, then, to Silverthorne’s relationship to art historical precedents is an examination of this stereotype of the “artist’s studio.” By deconstructing the studio, she is able to work with the traditional sculptural methods that she loves, but at the same time question these processes, which historically have been associated with gender exclusivity and class privilege. Silverthorne has explained her rationale for taking on the problematic site of the studio:

It’s certainly about the impossibility of making this kind of traditional work at the end of the twentieth century, when it’s been so compromised and used up. The question is, how can you be in a traditional studio and continue? One of the things you can do is look around the studio and start mapping that site as if it were something out of the past—as if it were an archaeological site.²

Silverthorne’s solution to this dilemma—analyzing the studio as if it were ancient ruins, a collection of unearthed objects intended to be carefully retrieved, copied, and

recorded – implies that the studio has become an antiquated site of production and, for this reason, a nostalgic space. Moreover, it suggests how this aura of nostalgia, by its very excess of sentimentality, can upset established discourses about the studio and its place within the history of art.

Silverthorne's comic critique of art history recalls the work of Marcel Duchamp, the master of Dada art earlier in the century. The title of her installation, *The Studio Stripped Bare, Again*, is, in fact, a play on Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (c. 1915-23), a large mixed-media work that taps analogies between scientific terms and sexual innuendo, offering a pessimistic commentary on the relationship between the sexes. Although Silverthorne's installation refers to *The Bride* only in its title, Duchamp's oeuvre generally provides an important context for all interrogations of the "copy" and its implied, revered other, the "original." Duchamp is perhaps most famous for his readymades, ordinary objects that were transformed into art works simply through the decision of the artist. The problematic question Duchamp's work poses for contemporary artists is how to acknowledge his conviction that an artist is never making an original thing without being trapped by his endgame strategies that predict the end of art as we traditionally understand it. In the wake of Duchamp, the creative tools that remain to artists today are repetition, appropriation, and quotation.



Silverthorne's own inquiry into originality reveals itself through her repetitive tactics. Her ongoing attempts to examine the space of the studio is apparent and even acknowledged forthrightly by the word "Again" in her title. Each sculpture, moreover, is not only a copy of some other image or object, but also, to varying degrees, a reference to art historical precedents.

Silverthorne's practice invokes repetition in order to generate the productive transformation that may arise through it—an effect articulated by the feminist literary critic Judith Butler. Describing the construction of gender identities, Butler has explained that socially established notions of masculinity and femininity gain meaning through persistent patterns of behavior.³ Changing these legitimated constructions of identity becomes possible when these actions or "performances" fail to repeat faithfully. It is in the inevitable, imperfect repetitions that the potential for change emerges and conventional notions may be subverted. Applying these ideas to Silverthorne's work, her sculptures can be seen as examples of what she calls "discrepant" or "warped" repetition that never perfectly replicate the subjects after which they are modeled.⁴ It is through these deliberate "failures" that the work may reconfigure gendered associations of the "studio," and the "artist."

Embedded within the ambitious criticality of Silverthorne's otherwise anti-heroic works, however, is an undeniable romantic aura, a wistful affection for those constructions of the past that she seeks to disrupt. This nostalgia reveals itself partly through her attention to formal concerns: despite their politicized protests, these sculptures are strangely handsome and sensuous. Underlying their melancholic beauty, however, is a sense of ridiculous futility. Like Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, who are destined day after day to wait and wait, Silverthorne continues in her studio. Her perseverance in the face of absurdity recalls the exasperated Estragon lamenting the return of tomorrow at the end of the play. "I can't go on like this," he proclaims. To which Vladimir replies simply, "That's what you think."

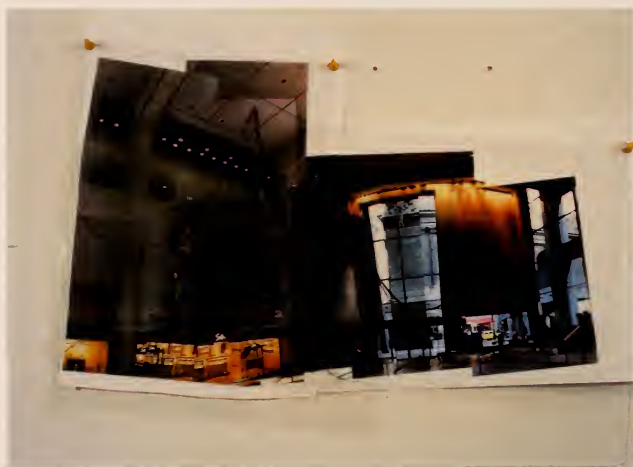
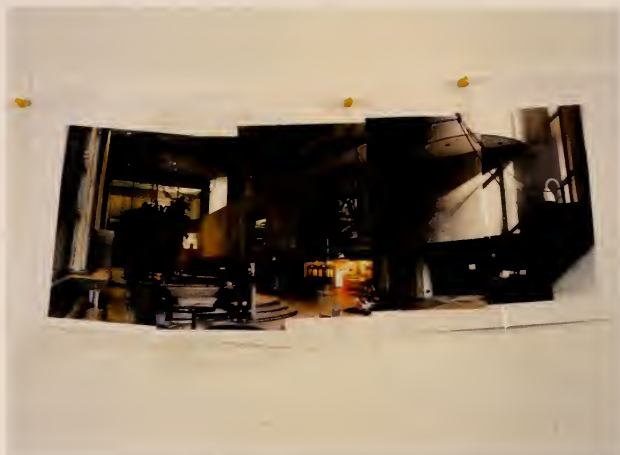


1. Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 2, 4.

2. Quoted in Judith Tannenbaum, *Jeanne Silverthorne*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1996), p. 13.

3. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 140–41.

4. Jeanne Silverthorne, "Sculptors on Sculpture/Jeanne Silverthorne: On the Studio's Ruins," *Sculpture*, 13 (November–December 1994), p. 28.



Jeanne Silverthorne

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1950

Temple University, Philadelphia (BA, 1971; MA, 1974)

Lives and works in New York City

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1982 P.S. 1, The Institute for Art and Urban Resources Inc.,
New York

1990 Christine Burgin Gallery, New York

1994 McKee Gallery, New York

Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris

1995 Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

1996 Institute of Contemporary Art, University of
Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

1997 "New Sculpture," McKee Gallery, New York

1998 Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, California
"Towards a New Century," Wright Museum of Art,
Beloit College, Wisconsin

1999 Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris

Selected Group Exhibitions

1984 "Made in Philadelphia 6," Institute of Contemporary
Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

1986 "Memento Mori," Centro Cultural/Arte
Contemporáneo, Mexico City

1987 "Standing Ground: Sculpture by American Women,"
The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati

1990 "Social Studies: 4 + 4 Young Americans," Allen
Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio

"Vertigo," Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris

1991 "Physical Relief," The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art
Gallery at Hunter College, New York

"Vertigo 'The Remake,'" Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac,
Salzburg


1992 "Mssr. B's Curio Shop," Thread Waxing Space,
New York

1993 "I Am the Enunciator," Thread Waxing Space,
New York

1994 "Half Truths: Photography and Verisimilitude,"
White Columns, New York

- 1995 "Configura 2: Dialog der Kulturen," Erfurt, Germany
 "Laughter Ten Years After," Ezra and Cecile Zilkha
 Gallery, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University,
 Middletown, Connecticut
- 1996 "Trilogia 6," Centro Espositivo della Rocca Paolina,
 Perugia, Italy
- 1997 "Metamorphosis: Il tempo della mutazione/
 The Time of Change," Claudia Gian Ferrari
 Arte Contemporanea, Milan
 "Gothic," The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
- 1998 "Rubber," Robert Miller Gallery, New York
 "The Edward R. Broida Collection: A Selection
 of Works," Orlando Museum of Art, Florida
 "Deep Storage," P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center,
 New York
 "A Pound of Flesh," Cynthia Broan Gallery, New York
- 1999 "EJ Privilegierte Räum/Unprivileged Spaces," Borås
 Konstmuseum, Sweden





Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris
120 Park Avenue at 42nd Street
New York, NY 10017

Gallery Hours

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Thursday, 11 am–7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday–Saturday, 7:30 am–9:30 pm

Sunday, 11 am–7 pm

Gallery Talks

Wednesday and Friday at 1 pm

Free admission

Tours by appointment

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